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A New Perspective on Justification. Recent Developments in the Study of Paul

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Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte¹

Some time ago, Cornelis van der Kooi and the present author organized a reading group at VU University Amsterdam for colleagues and students on Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. The intention was to bridge the gap between Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology, something that is still of great importance for doing theology today. For this reason the invitation to contribute to this collection of essays on justification and Pauline theology is another welcome opportunity to engage in the conversation between the two fields mentioned. This conversation is necessary, if only for the fact that the academic world has become so thoroughly specialized that it is nearly impossible to keep up with the developments in adjacent fields even within theology itself. Especially with regard to Paul and the concept of justification there have been quite a few developments in the past decades. The scholarly understanding of Paul's world, that of early Judaism, has changed profoundly, and with it came a thorough re-evaluation of Paul's own ideas, and especially his language of justification. Since the discussion on Paul and justification is part of the broader discussion on Paul and the law, it will not be possible to cover the whole range of topics that would be relevant for the present purpose. For this reason, this contribution will focus on the following points. First, a short introduction is given of the present author and his interest in Paul. After this a survey follows of the most important developments in the field of

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Pauline studies since E.P. Sanders changed the scholarly perspective on Paul in 1977. The third section of this essay is dedicated to reading Paul after the rise of the so-called New Perspective. And in the fourth section, finally, a couple of observations are made on how Paul's language of justification can be understood from a modern theological perspective.

1. THE PRESENT AUTHOR AND THE QUESTION OF PAUL

The present author's scholarly fascination for Paul goes back to 1995. In that year he attended the New Testament colloquium in Leiden, under the guidance of one of his PhD supervisors, prof. Henk Jan de Jonge. The colloquium was dedicated to the missionary strategies of Paul, and ended up, as a good academic colloquium does, with more questions than answers. The one question that seemed quite compelling was the question how we should position Paul as a missionary in the first century. This question became the basis of a monograph, published in 2003.² More recently a Dutch publisher wanted to publish an introduction to Paul, and that book followed in 2010.³ In the fifteen years that span the period between the NT colloquium in Leiden and the publication of this introduction to Paul, the author's views on early Judaism, early Christianity, and Paul's position in his context have changed considerably. For this reason, this essay is also a way of looking back at the road travelled during the period mentioned.

Let us start with the main insights reached in the two books mentioned and in several articles published on Paul and his message. There are three points that should be considered crucial for our understanding of Paul, and those points will come back during the rest of this essay.

1.1. IDENTITY

One of the main problems in coming to terms with Paul is the question concerning identity. Paul was definitely a Jewish author, and a Jewish preacher, but the development of the groups he established turned him into a Christian. Now the main difficulty is, that the term 'Christian' had not yet been coined in Paul's day, so he does not use the term at all.

² L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary* (CBET 34), Leuven [etc.]: Peeters 2003.

³ L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paulus en de rest. Van farizeeër tot profeet van Jezus*. Zoetermeer: Meinema 2010; translates as: *Paul, the Remainder, and the Rest. From Pharisee to Prophet of Jesus*.

Next to this, there is also discussion on the extent to which the terms 'Judaism' and 'Jewish' were in use, and what they meant.⁴ So what does it mean if we speak about Paul as a Jewish author? And are we right in looking at him as a Christian author? What if both epithets are anachronisms, as they are? Here an objection might be made. One could say that we have every right to read Paul as a Christian author, since Paul's writings feature prominently in the Christian canon and most scholars engaged in reading Paul are Christians themselves. Although in itself this is true, the main counterargument would be that Paul did not have a clue that this would ever be the case. So the question how Paul looked at his own identity and that of the Christ movement is of fundamental importance. It looks as though Paul saw the Christ movement as a new version of Israel in which Gentiles were accepted as *Gentiles*, and that corresponded to God's ultimate plan with Israel. But what were Paul's ideas on the position of Jewish followers of Jesus? And on Jews who did not agree with his gospel?

1.2. CONTEXT

If it comes to Paul's identity and the identity of the movement he propagated, we have to position him within his context. This is, by the way, also the case with regard to his letters: we cannot come to any kind of understanding of his letters, if we leave the context in which they were written out of consideration. We know from Paul's letters that he was a Hellenistic Jew who considered himself a Pharisee. But here, too, we have to ask what these labels signify and how they help – or limit – us in our understanding of Paul. What does it mean that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew? We know that he spoke and wrote Greek, but does this say anything about Paul's ability to speak and write Hebrew and Aramaic? If we study Paul's quotations from the Jewish Bible we see that they are almost always taken from a LXX version. The report in Acts, that Paul was educated in Jerusalem, seems to imply that he did indeed speak Aramaic.⁵ But here's another problem: how sure are we that Gamaliel taught in Aramaic? It lies at hand to assume this, but we have no written records of his classes!

4 On the use of the term 'Judaism', see S. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press 1999.

5 The classic study on the issue of Paul's education in Jerusalem is still W.C. van Unnik, 'Tarsus or Jerusalem. The City of Paul's Youth', in: *Sparsa Collecta. The Collected Essays of W.C. van Unnik* (SNT 29), Vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 1973, 259-320.

Speaking of Gamaliel: we have to reconstruct the characteristics of the Pharisees in order to know what this element adds to Paul's identity.⁶ Here, we are in the fortunate position that we can add evidence to Paul's letters from the writings of this other Pharisaic author, Flavius Josephus. As it seems, the Pharisees were Israel's lawyers. They were trained in applying the Mosaic law in everyday life, and thus it is clear that Paul must have devoted the main part of his life to studying the law.⁷

If we speak about Paul's context, the label 'apocalypticist' should deserve some attention too.⁸ Most scholars agree that Paul was an apocalyptic thinker. But what does that label tell us about Paul's context? It would seem that apocalypticists were learned mystics who wrote their complicated texts not just to spread their religious ideals, but also to criticize the political oppression by the Seleucid empire.⁹ Both elements in the apocalyptic tradition have attracted attention in for instance the *Society of Biblical Literature*. One group focuses on religious experience in antiquity, and several others on the study of empire and the political objectives of religious texts in early Judaism and early Christianity.¹⁰

1.3. LAW

The third point in studying Paul is the question as to the status of the mosaic law. It is quite clear that Paul did not want Gentile followers of Christ to adhere to the law, but what was his position with regard to Jewish followers of Christ? There is quite some discussion among Pauline

6 On the pharisees, see A.J. Saldañi, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society. A Sociological Approach*, Wilmington: Glazier 1988.

7 This image of the pharisees is confirmed by Flavius Josephus; see S. Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees. A Composition-Critical Study* (SPB 39), Leiden [etc.]: Brill 1991.

8 The best analysis of Paul's apocalyptic ideas is still J.C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle. The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1980.

9 See A. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire. Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2011. Portier-Young strongly develops the argument that apocalyptic authors presented their ideas as counter-narratives over against imperial power.

10 On the experiential setting of the sources, see E. Flannery, et al. (eds), *Experientia*, Vol. 1: *Inquiry into Religious Experience in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (SBLSS 40), Atlanta: SBL 2008; C. Shantz & R.A. Werline (eds), *Experientia*, Vol. 2: *Linking Text and Experience* (EJL 35), Atlanta: SBL 2012. Empire studies made their way into the fields of early Judaism and early Christianity primarily through R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire. Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 1997, and *idem*, *Jesus and Empire. The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2003.

scholars about this point. How does Paul position himself over against the law and how does he position the law within his view of Israel and Christ? This particular question will come back in a later section of this essay. For now it may suffice to state that Paul was apparently able to look at the law from an allegorical perspective and deny the validity of the law's letter while at the same time attributing authority to the law with regard to its spirit. Thus, he seems to have wanted to both uphold and abolish the validity of the law.¹¹ Given Paul's double take on the law, the conclusion is warranted that he did not argue against the validity of the law as such, but only against a certain understanding of its validity, viz. as an identity marker.

2. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN PAULINE STUDIES

A book of 1977 can hardly be called 'recent' and yet this is where we have to begin. This is the year when E.P. Sanders published his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.¹² The book instantly became a classic in the field and ushered in a whole new approach to Paul and early Christianity. This approach to Paul soon became known by a term coined by J.D.G. Dunn, 'the New Perspective on Paul' (henceforth: NPP).¹³ At the risk of repeating knowledge that is far from new for the reader, it does seem important to spend a couple of words on the NPP.

What are the most important characteristics of this approach to Paul? Sanders reconstructed the patterns of Judaism and Pauline Christianity and found that it was not the law, but the covenant that was central to early Judaism.¹⁴ According to Sanders, the keeping of the law should

11 This way of reading Paul was opened primarily by D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley [etc]: University of California Press 1994, esp. 86-105.

12 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, London: SCM Press 1977; see also his *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1983.

13 The term goes back to J.D.G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', in: *BJRL* 65 (1982-83), 95-122 (also published in his *Jesus, Paul, and the Law. Studies in Paul and Galatians*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1990, 183-206). According to Francis Watson, Dunn coined this term after reading N.T. Wright's unpublished Oxford PhD dissertation of 1980; cf. F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles. Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed., Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2007, 4 n.3.

14 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (ref. 12), esp. 422-423.

be seen as Israel's answer to its election by God.¹⁵ In the relationship of Israel and YHWH the fundamental notions are those of covenant and election: God has chosen Israel from among the nations and established His covenant through Abraham. The law was regarded as a later gift by YHWH, granted to Israel to indicate the correct way of life. Keeping the law, for that reason, was not regarded as the way to reach salvation, but as a correct answer to YHWH in response to the covenant. Since in Christ a new covenant was made, in which also Gentiles were included, the relationship between God and Israel changed profoundly. In Paul's view the law no longer mattered, since it was the new union with Christ that now defined how humankind should behave over against God.

Sanders' 1977 study is in fact mostly about Palestinian Judaism and less about Paul. In Sanders' analysis of Judaism he introduced the term 'covenantal nomism' for the pattern of the Jewish religion.¹⁶ Judaism had wrongly been perceived as a religion of people working hard to keep the commandments of the law in order to become righteous, in order to become justified. Sanders demolished the old, Lutheran perspective on Judaism, and introduced a new understanding of it, that has become highly influential.

In his analysis of Paul Sanders has stressed the importance of Christ for Paul.¹⁷ Paul's religion, Paul's theology starts with Christ and it is the experience of the living Christ and the importance of the Christ event in history that forms the focal point for his thoughts. The law only became a problem to Paul because of Christ, and the newness and impetus of the Christ event changed everything for Paul. The ways in which Paul looked at himself, at Israel, at Gentiles, at the world, at God – they have all changed profoundly because of Christ. Where the pattern of Jewish religion was defined primarily by the covenant of YHWH and Israel, the pattern of Pauline Christianity was defined by the new covenant ushered in by the Christ event. Sanders' reevaluation of Judaism and his

15 E.P. Sanders, *ibid.*, e.g. 543: "(...) salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works and grace are the condition of remaining 'in', but they do not earn salvation."

16 See esp. E.P. Sanders, *ibid.*, 422-423. Later, Sanders elaborated his views on Judaism in his *Judaism. Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*, London: SCM Press & Philadelphia: Trinity Press International 1992.

17 Sanders summarizes this briefly in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (ref. 12), 477: "To summarize: the main theme of Paul's gospel was the saving action of God in Jesus Christ and how his hearers could participate in that action."

interpretation of Paul's faith as centered in Christ are probably his biggest accomplishments.

In the wake of Sanders' work on Paul, Judaism, and the law the most important point in the study of Paul has become the reconstruction of his Jewish identity. How does Paul position himself and his movement over against Judaism, and how does this influence his view of the law?

The NPP primarily focuses on Paul as a Jewish author. Since this is by far the most interesting development in Pauline studies of the past decades, a number of NPP scholars shall be discussed here who have published important works on Paul. There are basically two groups of scholars who have taken up Sanders' studies and brought new ideas on Paul to the fore.¹⁸ The one group intends to rethink Paul from a historical perspective. Its main protagonists are John Gager, Daniel Boyarin, Alan F. Segal, and Pamela Eisenbaum. The other group studies Paul from a Christian perspective and also wants to understand him on his own terms, while at the same time taking into account his relevance for doing Christian theology today. Here, the most important names are all three related to Durham, UK: J.D.G. Dunn, N.T. Wright, and Francis Watson.

2.1. PAUL, JEWS, AND GENTILES

In his reconstruction of Paul, John Gager has taken up and elaborated Lloyd Gaston's idea, viz. that Paul opposes the law only in so far as Gentiles are concerned.¹⁹ This Gaston-Gager hypothesis entails the idea that Paul's rhetoric against the law in especially Galatians and Romans addresses a Gentile audience. In short, Paul would not have been opposed to Jewish followers of Christ keeping the law. The focus of Paul's argument would be that Gentiles are called to follow Christ *as Gentiles* and for that reason they should not be forced to keep the law. This approach brought Pamela Eisenbaum, a Jewish New Testament scholar, to her 2009 book *Paul was not a Christian*.²⁰ In her work, Eisenbaum argues that Paul's conversion was actually a call. She argues that it was the

18 As with most scholars, the authors mentioned may not be happy to be presented here as belonging to a 'group'. This designation is used for heuristic purposes only.

19 L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1987; J. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

20 P. Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian. The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*, San Francisco: Harper 2009.

religious tradition of Augustine and Luther that has created the wrong impression that Paul actually broke with Judaism and forms the background to the use of the term 'conversion' for Paul's transformation experience. Eisenbaum makes her point in an intelligent way, but still the Gaston-Gager-Eisenbaum view has a number of problems that seem to weaken the case made. Two points in particular are causing difficulties here:

1. It seems that at least in Romans Paul is not writing to a congregation that consists only of Gentile believers. This may have been the case in Galatians, where the strongest negative remarks on the law are found, but not in Romans. As a result, it is difficult to maintain the position that Paul's criticism of the law is rhetorical in nature and should be seen as directed against the keeping of the law by Gentiles only.
2. The second difficulty is the point that Eisenbaum states most clearly: Paul did not really break with his past, and what is often seen as his 'conversion' was actually a 'call'. This view seems clearly mistaken, and it is here that the work of another Jewish NT scholar – who sadly passed away too young – becomes relevant: Alan F. Segal. Segal has given a brilliant analysis of Paul in his book *Paul the Convert* (1990).²¹ The point Segal makes in this book, is this: Paul characterized the transformation experience in his life with an emic term as a 'call', but from a social-scientific point of view we are allowed to use the etic alternative, viz. 'conversion'. Paul presents his whole life much the same way as a stereotypical convert does: there is a huge distinction between 'before' and 'after', and the path that led to the conversion experience is presented as dark and gloomy. Converts usually describe how unhappy they were with their life before the big and bright change came about. According to Segal, this is exactly what Paul does if it comes to the law. Paul looks back on his life before Christ and pictures this life from the perspective he had gained after his conversion. By the way: in Segal's view it was a mystical experience that caused Paul's conversion, and here a typical NPP scholar credits Paul's religious experience in a way that is usually found in evangelical authors.

Daniel Boyarin has contributed to the study of Paul especially by two of his works: *A Radical Jew* (1994) and *Border Lines* (2004).²² The main

21 A.F. Segal, *Paul the Convert. The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1990.

22 D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity*, Berkeley [etc.]: University of

points Boyarin makes in these works are these. In *A Radical Jew* he interprets Paul as a thoroughly Hellenistic Jew, who reinterprets Israel's history and identity from a Greek philosophical perspective. Paul interprets the law in a Platonic way, that enables him to explain how the law can be abolished and upheld at the very same moment. Abolished, since the literal meaning of the law no longer applies; upheld, because the deeper meaning is fulfilled in Christ. It is the 'oneness of humankind' that Paul is concerned about and Boyarin considers Gal 3:28-29 the central tenet of Paul's faith: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (NRSV).

Boyarin's Paul is a cultural critic who is concerned with rethinking the salvation of Jew and Gentile in Christ. Boyarin argues that Paul's position was a dualistic position in the wake of Plato. It is this particular analysis that has been very influential in two ways. On the one hand, the study of Paul's relationship to pagan philosophers has become a focal point in Pauline studies. Here, the classic study has become Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (2000).²³ On the other hand, the emphasis on Paul's view of universality has found a new audience through the French philosopher Alain Badiou, who wrote a book on Paul as the founding father of universalism: *Saint Paul* (2003).²⁴ Badiou's analysis of Paul itself is part of a surge of studies in Paul by secular philosophers, such as, Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek, but for the present purpose they can be left out of consideration.²⁵

Back to Boyarin. In his *Border Lines* Boyarin has argued that the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity was not only not

California Press, 1994; *idem*, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004.

23 T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2000.

24 A. Badiou, *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism* (1997), Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003.

25 J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2004; G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005; S. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity*, Cambridge & London: MIT Press 2003. A brief discussion of modern philosophical interpretations of Paul is found in L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, 'The Reception of Paul in Modern Philosophy', in: T. Nicklas, et al. (eds), *Ancient Perspectives on Paul* (NTOA 102), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2013, 413-427.

completed by the end of the first century, but had actually just begun at that moment.²⁶ Boyarin is convinced that there were so many varieties of what we would now call Judaism and Christianity, that it was not until the late third and early fourth centuries that the two religions really separated. Again, Boyarin gives a provocative reconstruction of history. He seems to somewhat overstate his point, but at the same time it is important to realize that Judaism and Christianity both were no fixed and well-defined entities in at least the first two centuries. Here, it may be good to refer to Jonathan Z. Smith. Smith has written numerous publications on the taxonomy of religious groups and views, and in one of them he compares the problem of classifying early Judaism to the problem of classifying walnuts and pecan nuts: the two types of nuts are biologically related and belong to the same family of nuts, but they hardly bear any similarities.²⁷ If two types of nuts, that are as distinct as walnuts and pecan nuts, in a classification have to be regarded as belonging to the same family, shouldn't we say the same thing about the variety of groups within early Judaism? And if you continue along this line, which Smith does not do, shouldn't we say the same thing about the variety of groups within early Judaism and early Christianity? Why speak of two families here? Why not one? Smith proposes to work from a polythetic taxonomy and take into account the fact that the phenomenon we now label as early Judaism was in fact a thoroughly diverse phenomenon. The same claim can be made for early Christianity, as has already been done by Walter Bauer in 1934.²⁸

Since the parting of the ways is not the subject of this essay, this particular issue may be left out of consideration here, and it is time to return to Paul.

2.2. CHRISTIAN NEW PERSPECTIVES ON PAUL

Three scholars who are or were related to Durham, UK, have made

26 See also the essays in A.H. Becker & A. Yoshiko Reed (eds), *The Ways that Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (TSAJ 95), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003.

27 J.Z. Smith, 'Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism', in: *idem*, *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1982, 1-18.

28 W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie), Tübingen: Mohr 1934; English translation: *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1971.

significant contributions to the study of Paul.²⁹ J.D.G. Dunn held the Lightfoot professorship in New Testament studies at Durham university, N.T. Wright was bishop of Durham from 2003 until 2010, and Francis Watson currently holds the chair in Biblical Interpretation at Durham university. As indicated above, the term 'New Perspective' originates in a publication by Dunn, whereas it appears to have been coined by Wright.³⁰ And in his classic study of Paul and the Gentiles Watson intends to move "beyond the New Perspective". Let us take a closer look at all three of them.

Out of J.D.G. Dunn's many publications one book in particular should be mentioned at this point, that is of great importance to the subject of this collection: *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (1996).³¹ In a period in which especially Paul's rhetoric was being studied and the coherence of his thoughts was questioned, in particular by the Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen, Dunn carefully chose the title of his book.³² Why does Dunn argue that we *can* speak about Paul's theology, even if there are so many contradictions in Paul's work? The answer lies in Dunn's reconstruction of the concept of theology. For him, theology consists of three levels that consistently interact.³³ The first level of theologizing is the level of one's *inherited convictions*. For Paul, those convictions had to do with God, Israel, the covenant, the law, the Messiah. The second level is that of a person's biography: the life events a person experiences and transformations a person goes through change one's perspective on the inherited convictions. Life simply challenges you to rethink what your parents have taught you. Then the third level of theology is the level of everyday life:

29 If it comes to the study of Paul as a theologian, a name not to forget is that of J. Christiaan Beker. In 1980 this Dutch Princeton scholar had paved the way for later authors who wanted to address Paul as a theologian by his seminal work *Paul the Apostle. The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1980. In this book Beker analyzes Paul's thought from the perspective of coherence and contingency, and Beker saw what Sanders had seen before him, and many other have seen after them: it is the Christ event, in all its apocalyptic glory, that forms the coherence of Paul's thought.

30 See ref. 13 above.

31 J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996.

32 Cf. e.g. H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983; and *idem*, 'A Controversial Jew and His Conflicting Convictions', in: F.E. Udoh (ed.), *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities. Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2008, 319-335.

33 J.D.G. Dunn, *Theology* (ref. 31), 18.

you encounter situations that you need to respond to, and that response can change your views too. Usually the response will reflect your views rather than change them, but occasionally this does happen.

Now according to Dunn, Paul's letters are indeed occasional writings – this is a point that basically everybody agrees about – but they do reflect these three levels of theology. For this reason, we are allowed to speak of the theology of Paul, and in this theology the matter of Christ and the law is indeed one of the major points. As Sanders, Dunn is convinced that Paul's thought should be seen as focused on Christ; it is on the basis of Christ that he rethinks every other topic.

In Dunn's analysis, justification is a legal metaphor that is used to express the relationship of the believers and God. Dunn correctly stresses the fact that this is only one out of a variety of metaphors used by Paul to describe the new life of believers 'in Christ'. Other expressions of the same idea are e.g. 'redemption', 'liberation', 'freedom', 'reconciliation', 'salvation', and 'sanctification'.³⁴ According to Dunn, "these metaphors bring out the *reality* of the experience of the new beginning for Paul" and they are "attempts to express as fully as possible a reality which defied a simple or uniform or unifacted description".³⁵ By implication it is not possible to speak of justification by faith as the one crucial metaphor used by Paul to express the newness of life in Christ. It is the wide range of all metaphors mentioned that should be taken into account. This observation is a clear warning against a one-sided interpretation of the concept of justification as the all-encompassing religious doctrine proclaimed by Paul.

This said, it is important to focus on justification and look at the constitutive dynamics of this particular metaphor.³⁶ In Dunn's view the metaphor is grounded in the idea of the righteousness of God. Here, righteousness is understood as a relational concept: "righteousness" as the meeting of obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or she is part".³⁷ It is God who is righteous, not humankind. God actually defines the term 'righteousness', and the concept of 'justification' expresses the thought that God makes human beings righteous through his grace. Paul believed that God had opened up Israel to the

34 J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 328-333.

35 J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 331, 332.

36 This section discusses J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 334-389.

37 J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 341.

Gentiles and had made His grace available for them too. The covenantal relationship with Israel was thus expanded to include the Gentiles, and the fundamental point in this relationship became faith. Here, the term πίστις has a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the faithfulness of God and Christ, and on the other hand it appeals to the obligation of the believers to remain faithful themselves. Here, Dunn argues that the crucial term used by Paul – πίστις χριστοῦ – should not be translated as ‘faith of Christ’, but as ‘faith in Christ’.³⁸ It is, in other words, the believers’ faith in Christ that saves them, not the faithfulness of Christ himself. In Dunn’s reconstruction, justification is a metaphor that expresses acceptance by God and unhindered access to God.³⁹ Those who believe in Christ are unconditionally accepted by God and declared righteous on the basis of their faith. Thus, they are being ‘justified by faith’. It is important, however, to keep in mind that this is only one out of a variety of metaphors Paul uses to describe the newness of the believers’ life.

Another influential scholar whose name should be mentioned here is N.T. Wright. In his *The Climax of the Covenant* he argues in the wake of Sanders that Paul’s thought focuses on the covenant.⁴⁰ According to him, Paul’s discussion of the relation to Israel in Romans 9-11 forms the climax of the epistle to the Romans, which itself should be seen as the pinnacle of Paul’s work. It is the establishment of the new people of God through Christ that according to Wright formed the focal point of Paul’s theology. In his popular work on *Justification* of 2009 Wright has presented his view on the subject in similar terms.⁴¹ He stresses, as others do, the legal context of the concept of justification. ‘To justify someone’ is a legal act by means of which the person involved is acquitted of guilt, declared righteous. In his *magnum opus* published in 2013, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*,⁴² Wright uses 1,800 pages to explain Paul’s position.⁴³

38 J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 379-385.

39 J.D.G., Dunn, *ibid.*, 385-389.

40 N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant. Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1991.

41 N.T. Wright, *Justification. God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2009.

42 N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God (Christian Origins and the Question of God 4)*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2013.

43 One may wonder whether the length of this publication is useful for any other purposes than exhausting the reader.

It is probably no accident that Wright uses his chapters 9-11 to develop his most important argument.

Within this argument Wright mentions four characteristics that shape Paul’s ideas about justification. First of all he argues that the *shape* of his ideas on justification are similar to what is found in early Judaism. His prime witness for early Jewish ideas on justification is a Qumran text known as 4QMMT: “There, those who keep particular ‘works of Torah’ in the present time will have ‘righteousness’ reckoned to them. Such people, in other words, *will be reckoned to be part of the covenant family now, in the present*, against the day when the new age arrives and all will be revealed.”⁴⁴ So the shape of justification as a notion is this: now, in the present, the person who is considered justified, belongs to the covenant and is declared righteous because it is believed that on the basis of his or her present conduct he or she will be acquitted by God at His final intervention in history. Wright thus approaches the idea of justification as a legal metaphor that is used to define someone’s covenant status in the present based on the expected eschatological redemption the person is believed to acquire in the future. To this, however, Wright adds that there are four elements that distinguish Paul’s ideas on justification from ideas found in his Jewish context.

The first difference is, that Paul believed that the new age has already begun and “eschatology has been inaugurated in a new and dramatic way”, viz. by the advent of the Messiah. Secondly, “the Messiah’s death was not incidental (...). The fact, and especially the manner, of his death indicated that the covenant God would not affirm Israel as it stood.”⁴⁵ Wright adds, in sermon style: “The only way into the age to come would be by dying and rising again.”⁴⁶ The third difference is that “the outpouring of the spirit indicated to Paul that the promises of Deuteronomy 30, and the echoing promises of Jeremiah and Ezechiel had been fulfilled.”⁴⁷ As a result, πίστις becomes the crucial element in the covenant relationship with God. And fourthly, this covenant relationship now extends also to Gentiles: “the circumcised-heart people, marked out by *pistis*, was a company that included Jews and gentiles alike.”⁴⁸ To this fundamental

44 N.T. Wright, *Faithfulness* (ref. 42), 930 (italics Wright).

45 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*, 930-931.

46 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*, 931.

47 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*

48 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*

analysis of the structure of the concept of justification, Wright rightly adds that "'Justification' was not a hot topic in first-century Judaism. It became so in Paul's work and thought for the reasons set out a moment ago."⁴⁹ In his view, the prominence of the concept of justification in Paul can be explained as follows:

"In the language of 'righteousness' and 'justification', already implicit in the covenantal train of thought, Paul found the perfect vehicle to explain how the covenant God, through the Messiah and the spirit, had dealt with the deeper problem of human sin, including Jewish sin."⁵⁰

Wright's analysis of justification contains a number of important points. Wright correctly emphasizes the uniqueness of the prominence of this particular idea in Paul as well as the fact that it was already present in the 'train of thought' that Paul followed up on. Also the eschatological character of the framework that defines the content of the concept is of crucial importance. It may be doubted whether the connection to the outpouring of the spirit was indeed as crucial to Paul as it is to Wright, but be that as it may: it is clear from Wright's analysis that the concept of justification is used by Paul to rethink and redefine the covenantal status of the followers of Jesus Christ in eschatological terms by means of a legal image.

The third Durham scholar, Francis Watson, in his *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles* (1984; revised edition 2007), presents a sociological approach to Paul and his letters.⁵¹ By means of this approach he hopes to move 'beyond the New Perspective' (subtitle of the revised edition of 2007). According to Watson, the social realities that Paul addresses in his letters are of fundamental importance for understanding what it is that Paul intends to communicate. Watson argues, in line with Sanders and others, that the traditional, Lutheran understanding of Paul is historically wrong. Paul did not intend to describe Judaism as a religion eager to gain salvation by deeds, nor did he present Christianity as an alternative pattern of religion based on faith and grace. Focusing primarily on a historical analysis of Paul, Watson intends his work to contribute to a theological

49 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*, 932.

50 N.T. Wright, *ibid.*, 933 (original in italics).

51 F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles. Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. and exp. ed. Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2007.

reevaluation of the letters.⁵² According to Watson, Paul's letters reflect the "transformation of a reform movement into a sect".⁵³ It is this social dynamics that defines the status of Paul's language, and shapes its character. This comes clearly to the fore in three important characteristics of Paul's rhetoric: it focuses on demarcation, antithesis, and reinterpretation.⁵⁴ From this perspective, Watson interprets Galatians and Romans as attempts by Paul to shape the socio-religious character of the groups he addresses. Paul's vision of God's plan entails the shaping of a new Israel, open to Gentiles, formed by the Messiah Jesus and not by the lawgiver Moses. The antitheses between grace and righteousness, between gospel and law, between faith and works, etc., should be interpreted against this background: they intend to legitimate the existence of the Pauline churches in which the confession of Jesus as Messiah had replaced the law of Moses as the deciding boundary marker. In his conclusion, Watson gives a clear evaluation: "Paul's discussions of such themes as law and works, grace and faith, election and promise are thus to be regarded as *an attempt to legitimate the social reality of sectarian Gentile Christian communities in which the law was not observed*."⁵⁵

In the revised edition of his book, Watson adds a paper read at King's College, London, in 1993. In this paper he offers an analysis of the theological status of Paul's letters, based on the approach laid out in the book as a whole. This analysis is important for the present essay, and will recur in its final section.

It is time to wrap up this summary of the most important developments in Pauline studies. It was argued at the start that the three issues that are of crucial importance are identity, context, and the status of the law. After the preceding survey of some major works on Paul, this point will be clear.⁵⁶ The questions that we are dealing with now are: How should we

52 This position shifted between the first and second editions of the book; cf. Watson's conclusion in 2007: *ibid.*, 344-350.

53 F. Watson, *ibid.*, 86.

54 F. Watson, *ibid.*, 88-89.

55 F. Watson, *ibid.*, 345.

56 Other works could be mentioned too, such as e.g. K. Stendahl, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', in: *HTR* 65 (1963), 199-215; *idem*, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*, London: SCM 1977; and J.L. Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (SNTW), Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1997. A full discussion of all relevant literature is impossible in this essay.

describe Paul's identity and that of the groups he founded? How should we situate Paul over against Judaism and Hellenism? And what is Paul's argument with regard to the Mosaic law? Let us keep these questions in mind in the next section that deals with reading Paul after the rise of the New Perspective.

3. READING PAUL AFTER THE NEW PERSPECTIVE: A HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGY

Most New Testament scholars who read Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* are struck by the immediacy with which Barth engages in a conversation with Paul.⁵⁷ Occasionally one is left with the impression that Barth uses Paul in order to hide the fact that he was actually engaged in a conversation with himself. It is H.-G. Gadamer's observation that the reader of a text turns that text (and its author!) into a contemporary by the act of reading that points at the actual problem here.⁵⁸ In the field of Biblical Studies the context is seen as crucial for any understanding of a text. The fundamental idea of historical criticism is and should be the observation that our texts are actually fundamentally strange to us. This point may be illustrated by anecdotal evidence and common experience.

The present author was raised as son of a Dutch Reformed minister. In his family the bible was discussed on a daily basis. Passages were read at the dinner table, but also at lunch. Family meals took the form of small liturgical celebrations, and this resulted in a profound love for the bible. Occasionally, Paul would be sitting at that dinner table. These encounters with Paul inevitably led to a specific image of the apostle. In the scholarly quest for Paul that followed later, the image generated by the habit of reading Scripture in a family setting appeared to be both an advantage and an obstacle. The advantage was that Paul had been a familiar figure for years already, and the obstacle was quite the same thing. The dinner table Paul was a Lutheran Paul, and he had been a contemporary for a long time. Reading Paul as a contemporary is not wrong, but it is risky, because the modern reader misses out on the cultural dimensions of Paul's language.

⁵⁷ See now K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (zweite Fassung, 1922), (GA II), ed. by C. van der Kooij & K. Tolstaja; Zürich: TVZ 2010.

⁵⁸ H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), I.a. 250-290.

An American missionary in a non-Western country once spoke about his experience in learning the local language. He had started to learn the language from the idea that once he would know the grammar and the vocabulary, he would be able to speak with the locals in their own language and understand them. Once he had mastered the grammar and the vocabulary, he found out he was wrong. He explained why:

"Learning the language was one thing, but when I finally spoke the language, I found out that I did not know the cultural codes. It's actually the same with the Bible: you think you'll understand the texts once you know Hebrew and Greek, but you're wrong. That's the moment you find out that you don't know the cultural codes, and you're in fact a long way from understanding the texts you study!"

So here is the dilemma: on the one hand we turn Paul into our contemporary by reading his epistles, on the other hand we have to learn the grammar, the vocabulary, *and* the cultural codes in order to get an idea what it is he is talking about. In doing theology we need to do both these things: read Paul as a contemporary and try to capture his language and everything that goes with it. Perhaps here it is relevant to mention the process described by Paul Ricoeur in his view of 'second naïveté'.⁵⁹ We have to start by distancing ourselves from Paul. We have to get rid of the first naïveté, get rid of the dinner table Paul. We have to learn the language, the vocabulary, and the cultural codes in order to understand the texts we are reading. And after having done all of that, we can read our texts again in a second naïveté and embark in a conversation with Paul. This way, he becomes a new contemporary.

From this perspective, the question becomes: what is the conversation we would need to have with Paul today? Obviously it should touch upon the points mentioned before: the identity of Paul and the Christ movement, the reconstruction of Paul's cultural context and the way he positions himself as a cultural critic, and the status of the law. And then the outcome of that conversation should be a better understanding of how Paul understood God and how he thought human beings should position themselves over against God. It is here that the term 'justification' has to be highlighted, and that is what the final part of this essay intends to do. First, however, a couple of words should be said on the direction the conversation with Paul should take.

⁵⁹ See e.g. P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 298.

Paul Ricoeur's view of identity focuses on its narrative aspects: ask a person to describe herself and the answer will be a story.⁶⁰ People define themselves by means of stories and thus the reconstruction of the narrative framework of Paul's thought tells us something about his identity. Two elements of Paul's narrative world immediately become apparent when we analyse his letters: his experience of Christ and his interpretation of the history of Israel. The emphasis Paul puts on the importance of Christ as the risen Lord who reigns from heaven indicates how crucial the experience of his call must have been for Paul.⁶¹ In speaking about himself, he mentions this experience, even though reluctantly. It is in Gal 1:15-17 and 1 Cor 9:1 that Paul speaks about this event and it is clear that it shaped him. Next to this, in 2 Cor 12:1-4 Paul mentions an "abundance of visions and revelations" and describes one ecstatic experience in particular as a rapture experience.⁶² Often overlooked, the experiential dimension of Paul's God talk is crucial for any understanding of his letters. In Paul's narrative the direct experience of Christ formed a tremendously important element.

The second element that we have to take into account is the way in which Paul positions the Christ event in the narrative of the history of Israel. If we look at Romans, Paul positions Christ over against Adam (Rom 5; cf. 1 Cor 15:22.45). So the story begins with Adam. Far more emphasis is laid on Abraham (Rom 4:1-3.9.12-13.16, 9:7, 11:1; Gal 3:6.14.16.29, 4:22). Especially the designation "children of Abraham" is important here, and Gal 3:29 is quite clear in this respect: "... if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (NRSV). Paul establishes a narrative connection between

60 This approach was brought to the present author's attention by ms. Christine Kranenburg, who graduated at VU University in 2012 on a thesis on Romans 1-8 read from the perspective of Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur's view of narrative identity, see esp. P. Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in: D. Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation* (Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature), London: Routledge 1988, 20-33.

61 On the heavenly status of Jesus in Paul's ideas, see e.g. L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, 'The Name above All Names (Phil. 2:9)', in: G.H. van Kooten (ed.), *The Revelation of the Name YHWH to Moses. Perspectives from Judaism, the Pagan Graeco-Roman World, and Early Christianity* (TBN 9), Leiden & Boston: Brill 2006, 187-206. A far more elaborate study of Paul's view of Jesus as the Risen Lord is given by L. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003, 79-153.

62 For an elaboration of this argument, see L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, 'Paul's Rapture. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 and the Language of the Mystics', in: F. Flannery, et al. (eds), *Experientia*, Vol. 1 (ref. 10), 159-176.

Abraham and Christ, and he juxtaposes Christ and Adam. But what does he do with Moses? He mentions Moses as the author of the law (Rom 9:5, 10:5.19; 1 Cor 9:9), whose words are read 'today' (2 Cor 3:15). Interestingly enough, Paul mentions Moses, but does not relate him directly to Jesus Christ. Instead, Paul indicates the difference between the two in Gal 3:19 by characterizing Moses as a 'mediator' (μεσίτης), thereby implying that in Christ God has revealed himself directly.

Reading Paul in this manner indicates his concern about positioning himself in the history of Israel. This approach leads to the idea that for Paul the two concepts of 'Israel' and 'Judaism' do not coincide. Paul claims to be standing in the history of Israel, even to be continuing that history in the only way God had in mind. At the same time he distances himself from ιουδαισμός (Gal 1:13-14), thereby introducing a distinction that is often missed by interpreters: the distinction between 'Judaism' and 'Israel'.⁶³ For Paul, Christ had become the focal point in the new covenant between YHWH and His people, and in this new covenant Gentiles were allowed to become members of Israel, as Gentiles. Over against this revolutionary new understanding of Israel, Paul argued against 'Judaism' as a socio-religious movement that focused on the law and circumcision as the fundamental identity markers instead of the Messiah.

Important as it may be, the question of the law and its validity cannot be discussed in this essay. It would exceed the scope possible within the limits of the present collection. The focal point for now should be on Paul's language of justification and it is to this that the next and last section of this contribution turns. How should we understand Paul's concept of justification?

4. READING PAUL'S LANGUAGE OF JUSTIFICATION TODAY

In the appendix to the revised edition of his *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, Francis Watson argues that the lasting theological legacy of Paul should be seen in the combination of a number of ideas that define the Christian grammar.⁶⁴ Most prominent among these ideas are the role of

63 See J.D.G. Dunn, *Theology* (ref. 31), 346-354. *Idem*: "(...) the term 'Judaism' seems to have been coined as a means of giving focus to the determination of the Maccabean patriots to defend the distinctive national identity given them by their ancestral religion. (...) 'Judaism' defined itself over against the wider Hellenism, including Hellenizing Jews", 348.

64 F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles* (ref. 51), 351-369.

Jesus as the Christ, the incarnation of God, the insight that the mosaic law is no longer needed as an instrument to gain access to the people of God, that life within that people of God is about freedom, and that the Scriptures of Israel (known as the Old Testament) should remain just as authoritative for Christians today as the apostolic writings (known as the New Testament). In this brief, but compelling piece of theology, Watson does not mention the concept of justification, but he does clarify the position Paul should have in doing theology today. The present author largely agrees with that position, but would like to add the question: how should the concept of 'justification' be positioned within the grammar of Christian theology? Three elements are of fundamental importance here: the fact that Paul's language of justification is relational in character, Dunn's observation that justification is only one metaphor out of a larger variety, and the contextual character of Paul's ideas. In this final section each of these three observations will be taken into account.

4.1. RELATIONAL CHARACTER

The Greek word for justification, *δικαίωσις*, occurs only twice in Paul's letters: Rom 4:25 and 5:18. The concept, however, is important to Paul's view of the gospel and cognates like *δικαιος*, *δικαιόω*, and *δικαιοσύνη* are found throughout the letters.⁶⁵ The semantic field Paul applies here is a legal field, something that is stressed by almost all interpreters.⁶⁶ This is not strange for a Pharisee, it would seem, since Pharisees were the lawyers of early Judaism.

The terminology Paul uses refers to the correct attitude of a person with regard to his obligations over against others.⁶⁷ The Hebrew equivalent *רָצָה* refers to the same state of affairs: a 'righteous' person is a person who justly fulfills his obligations towards other people and towards God.

65 *Δικαιόω*: Rom 2:13, 3:4.20.24.26.28.30, 4:2.5, 5:1.9, 6:7, 8:30.33; 1 Cor 4:4, 6:11; Gal 2:16.17, 3:8.11.24, 5:4; 1 Tim 3:16; *Δικαιος*: Rom 1:17, 2:13, 3:10.26, 5:7.19, 7:12; Gal 3:11; 1 Tim 1:9; *Δικαιοσύνη*: Rom 1:17, 3:5.21.22.25.26, 4:3.5.6.9.11.13.22, 5:17.21, 6:13.16.18.19.20, 8:10, 9:30.31, 10:3.4.5.6.10, 14:17; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 3:9, 5:21, 6:7.14, 9:9.10, 11:15; Gal 2:21, 3:6.21, 5:5; 1 Tim 6:11.

66 E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (ref. 12), 506, correctly stresses the difference: "The righteous man in Judaism is actually the man who is properly religious, who obeys the law and repents of transgression. Paul accepts only the heuristic definition: it is a term which can be employed for being 'properly religious'."

67 Thus, the first translation of the term *δικαιος* given by BDAG is "being in accordance with high standards of rectitude".

It is one of the main achievements of Sanders that he has taken into account the fact that the concept of righteousness is linked to the law, but not in the sense that many had in mind before. A *tzaddik* is not someone who perfectly holds the law and does not make any mistakes; a *tzaddik* is someone who admits his mistakes and seeks atonement for them.⁶⁸ A righteous person may have broken the law, but since he is aware of his mistakes and makes up for them, the righteous will not be condemned. Thus, atonement is a necessary means for obtaining or keeping the status of a righteous person.

The verb *δικαιοῦσθαι* means to 'be pronounced righteous' and the active stem *δικαιόω* refers to making someone righteous.⁶⁹ These are forensic terms that express the effect of the verdict of a judge. If someone is 'made righteous', the person receives the qualification that he is considered in balance over against his obligations. The various approaches discussed above indicate that Paul uses this particular language to express the fact that it is God who as judge has the authority to declare a human being righteous. The language of justification is therefore an expression of the belief that Jews and Gentiles in Christ are put 'in the right' over against God. It is God who declares them righteous on the basis of their faith, and this means that for Paul faith is the correct human attitude towards God. 'Faith', however, is used here not just as a spiritual, but also as a social category. Faith is what connects Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and thus it forms a new faith based community that Paul understands as Israel, founded on the new covenant of the Messiah.

The legal context out of which the metaphor of justification is taken strongly defines the content of the metaphor: it describes the relationship of the believers and God. The acquittal of guilt and sin on the basis of faith should lead to a new life of sanctification over against God. Thus, the concept of sanctification is closely linked to that of justification. It is not by accident that Paul addresses the Corinthians as *ἡγιασμένοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* (...), *κλητοῖς ἁγίοις* (1 Cor 1:2). The effect of being justified by God is a status of being 'holy'. This concept, too, is defined by its relational aspect: the believers are 'sanctified' by God, and for that reason Paul can address them as 'holy ones'.

68 See esp. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (ref. 12), 183-205.

69 The discussion on the difference between 'declaring righteous' and 'making righteous' is a non-discussion. In the honour-shame culture of the first century Mediterranean region, these two things were considered to coincide.

4.2. ONE METAPHOR AMONG OTHERS

Dunn's argument that justification by faith may be crucial to Paul, but is not nearly the only concept he uses in order to express the new covenantal relationship of the believers with God, should be taken seriously. The alternative metaphors he mentions – 'redemption', 'liberation', 'freedom', 'reconciliation', 'salvation', 'sanctification' – all express the same thing, viz. that the status of the believers has been profoundly changed *by God*. The action starts with God, in Paul's view, and this is the constituent factor in the various metaphors Paul uses. If Paul describes the freedom of the believers in Gal 5:1-11 his use of the concept of 'freedom' is clearly influenced by the debate on the law. It is through Christ that God has 'freed' the believers: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1). Christ's action has brought liberation for the believers, but also redemption. The semantic domain of σωτηρία has a wide range of meanings in pagan Greek texts, varying from the safe return of a ship in its harbor to the idea of eternal life. Here, too, the underlying reality Paul expresses by this metaphor is that of the profound change in status experienced by the believers because of God's intervention in history through Christ.

The various metaphors Paul uses all stand in an eschatological framework. They are defined to a high degree by Paul's apocalyptic beliefs. Paul was convinced that he lived in the final period of history and he thought the advent of Christ was actually the final turning point of history. According to Paul Christ had been 'sent' by God, and the moment God decided to do so was the decisive moment in history that ushered in its final stage. A clear expression of this idea is given in Gal 4:4-5: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children." The language Paul uses in this one sentence has legal references,⁷⁰ but also has a socio-economic ring to it: the verb ἐξαγοράζω is generally used for the ransoming of slaves.⁷¹ They can be bought in order for them to obtain freedom. The third metaphor Paul uses in this one sentence is that of adoption: by ransoming the believers Christ has given them a status that compares to his own status

⁷⁰ The expression 'the fullness of time' is also found in legal contracts such as a will as a description for a fixed term of a certain state of affairs; see M.C. de Boer, *Galatians. A Commentary* (NTL), Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2011, 261-262.

⁷¹ See M.C. de Boer, *ibid.*, 264.

of God's son. The believers participate in Christ's fate and thus obtain a new status over against God.

4.3. CONTEXTUAL MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF JUSTIFICATION

The one example of Gal 4:4-5 not only indicates how Paul can combine metaphors out of different fields of human experience to describe the new covenantal status of the believers, but also shows how important it is to take Paul's context into account. The concept of justification can thus not be used as an individual concept apart from other metaphors and apart from the socio-economic context in which Paul wrote. 'Liberation', 'redemption', 'justification', and the other metaphors used by Paul all refer to various contexts of human social interaction. The fundamental meaning of these metaphors is, that they express the new relationship of the believers and God.

As said, it is not by accident that the lawyer Paul uses a judicial metaphor like 'justification'. The context of this metaphor is that of a court room where the judge pronounces a verdict over a suspect, and the theological framework in which Paul uses this particular concept is that of the apocalyptic expectation of God's judgement over the world. Paul firmly believes that God will in the end act as a judge, and he is convinced that by sending his Messiah to the world, God has already inaugurated that judgement. Seen from this perspective, the concept of justification is an eschatological metaphor that refers to the social dynamics in court. God is implied as the authority who passes judgement over humankind, and his authority is unquestioned. In Paul's understanding the salvific function of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, is that he opened up Israel to the Gentiles, and inaugurated a new covenantal status for Israel.

The old theological debate about faith and works should be seen in this perspective. Paul argues against the keeping of the law as a means of entering the covenant. The new covenant is available through God's grace, and is open to all who believe. Now it is important to stress, at this point, that the new status of the believers within this covenant does not lead to libertarianism. Instead, the believers are called upon to lead their lives in a sanctified way. Paul's letters are strong ethical admonitions, and time and again Paul intends his readers to focus on their behaviour, on their deeds. These deeds, however, are not a means to obtain salvation, but a response to the new covenantal status. Thus, the structure of Paul's thought is defined to a high degree by what Sanders established as the pattern of covenantal nomism. As a Pharisee, Paul considered the

law the correct response to the covenant of election. As an apostle, he thought sanctification would be the correct response to the covenant of the Messiah. Thus, the dichotomy of faith and works is a false dichotomy for Paul: in the new covenantal relationship of Israel and God a correct ethical attitude is seen as the right human answer to God's invitation of grace. Seen from this perspective, the concept of justification is one of the possible expressions Paul uses to describe the new balance between God and humankind, ushered in by the Christ event. As Sanders already argued, justification is not a doctrine, but a metaphor among others.⁷² The core of Paul's theology is not to be found in any one metaphor, but in the structure of the Christ event as framework for the various metaphors used by Paul. Justification, redemption, freedom, reconciliation, salvation, sanctification, participation in Christ: all these ideas indicate the new creation that Paul thought had been inaugurated by God through Christ (see 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

72 E.g. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (ref. 12), 492; cf. 506: "(...) righteousness by faith and participation in Christ ultimately amount to the same thing."

Justification: Ninety-Four Theses

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George Hunsinger

CHRIST IMPARTS HIS PERFECT RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. Jesus Christ is our righteousness. (1 Cor 1:30)
2. We will never have any other righteousness before God than the righteousness we have in him.
3. He gives us his righteousness by giving us himself, and in giving us himself he gives us his perfect righteousness. (Calvin)
4. His person and his benefits are one. He does not give the one without the other.
5. Union with Christ is therefore the context within which the benefit of his righteousness is imparted to us.
6. It is freely imparted by grace through faith, and it is in virtue of this perfect, imparted righteousness that we are justified before the judgment seat of God.¹

THE GROUND OF OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IN CHRIST

7. The righteousness imparted by Christ is grounded in his perfect obedience, both active and passive, which took place apart from us (*extra nos*) for our sakes and in our place.
8. By his active obedience he perfectly fulfilled the law of love in all its dimensions, while by his passive obedience he perfectly bore, in his passion and death on the cross, the just penalty of the law against sin in order that we might be spared.
9. This, then, is the great exchange (*admirabile commercium*), that he takes our sin and death to himself and gives us his righteousness and life.

1 It is not unprecedented in English to speak of Christ's righteousness as being "imparted" to us by grace through faith. See: "The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 56," in: *The Book of Confessions*, Louisville (KY): Office of the General Assembly, PCUSA 2004, 37. Here "imparted" carries essentially the same meaning as "imputed."